

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AFRICAN CULTURES AND TRADITIONS FROM THE NEGRITUDE PERSPECTIVE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BIRAGO DIOP'S "VIATICUM"

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Abstract: This paper probed the indispensability of the African cultures and traditions within the purview of negritude, with the critical study of the selected poem; bringing out the quintessence of the traditions of Africa from the poem. The selected poem was presented and critically studied, then followed by the analysis of it, which comprises the plot synopsis, literary motives of the poet, literary devices and style used by the poet to explain the contents of the poem in order to bring out the cultural idiosyncrasy of the African continent. Karl Vossler's 'Literary Stylistic Analysis(LSA) was used to analyse the poem, which helped the researcher to get meaningful findings and conclusion, geared towards the core words (cultures and traditions) in the title of the paper. In a nutshell, the result, emanated from the analysis and interpretation of the selected poem, showed that the essence of most African writings is to show the African cultures. This assertion corroborates that of Abiola's (1990), cited in Ogundipe (2011) which states that, "African writers write about their black cultures, using their own myths and legends, and depicting the black ways of life as something to be proud of anywhere" (p.5-6).

Index Terms: Africa, Culture, Traditions, Negritude, Analysis of Selected Poem, Devices, Style.

1. Introduction

Africa is a geographical segment of the global world with very rich and distinct cultures, norms, beliefs and traditions. The parts of its cultures are expressed through language, which give them meaningful outlooks, different from other continents of the world. Of course, Cruse defines language, cited in Adesida (2009) as "a system of conventional signs, all aspects of whose structure (sic) phonology, morphology, syntax, e.t.c. exist ultimately to serve the function of conveying meaning" (p.106). The African writers use language in such a way that explicitly portrays the habitualness of Africa.

As cutlass and hoe are important to a farmer, clay to a porter; so also are cultures and traditions to the African people. This is owing to the fact that 'their identity emanates from their cultures. One of the aims of Negritude (Literary Movement in Africa) from which the contextual pertinence of this study is derived, is to 'revalorise and revamp the African cultures', depreciated or belittled by colonisation and westernisation. This paper, thus, investigates the importance of African traditions, particularly the beliefs and love of African people towards their gods; with reference to the selected poem, "Viaticum".

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Concise Note on African Cultures and Traditions

The culture of Africa is varied and chained, comprising of an assemblage of countries with varieties of tribes, and unique features from the continent of Africa. It is a product of dissimilar populations, dwelling in the African society and the scattered African people across the globe, particularly foreign countries. The African culture is portrayed in its folklore, religion, poem, clothing, arts and crafts, music and languages (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/culture-of-Africa>).

Within Africa, the portrait of culture is numerous, coined with bountiful amount of cultural diversity across different countries, and within a single country. In spite of this diversity within the African society, there are still congruities among them, when closely studied. For instance, their love and beliefs in their gods, the morals they uphold, and respect for the elderly people. These congruities can be seen in Leopold's assertion that, "there is a shared culture among different countries of Africa" (Leopold, 1993).

The crucial aspect of the African traditions is oral one, which can be transmitted from one generation to another. By virtue of nature, singing is indispensable to the African community, as its melody and rhythm follow the intonation of the song text. Apart from singing, praise (poetic eulogy), rituals, incantatory rendering and invocations are parts of the African traditions (<https://www.victorialfalls-guide.net/African-traditions.html>).

2.2 Negritude as a Literary Concept in Africa

Negritude is a literary movement which began in the 1930s through 1940s and 1950s among French speaking African and Caribbean writers, residing in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and policy of assimilation. It had its origin from the French word, 'negre' whose English interpretation was 'negro', an insulting word used to describe the Africans (black people) in the white dominated society such as United State in New York, Paris and so forth (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/negritude>). The pioneers of the

movement were Leopold Seder Senghor from Senegal, Aime Cessaire from Martinique and Leon Dames from French Guiana who were literarily preoccupied then, with intent to explore the western values critically and re-evaluate the African cultures.

The affirmation of the black pride by members of negritude movement was attended by a cry against assimilation policy, which devalued the African cultures and traditions, and made Africans, subjected to suffering and humiliation under the bondage of slavery and colonial rule (Ogundipe 2011). These unpleasant experiences triggered many of the basic ideas behind negritude that the mystical affection of African life, having strength from its closeness to nature and its frequent intimacy with ancestors, should be taken to a top priority, as against the soullessness and materialism of western culture, that Africans must embrace their cultural heritage to determine the values and traditions that are most useful in the modern world. All these thematic preoccupations were treated in Senghor's poetry and other writers, inspired by him such as Birago Diop, whose poems explore the rituals and mystics, David Diop, writer of revolutionary protest poetry, and a host of others (Leopold Senghor, 1993).

Negritude was led by Leopold Seder of Senegal, who started a magazine called, 'the negro students' in 1934, with the assemblage of some negro students of whom were Aime Cessaire and Leon Dames, they started an attack on the French policy of assimilation after they had also studied anthropology which was formerly studied by the whites, who then wrote inaccurate stories about Africa. Senghor and his group then, decided in 1934 to propagate their literary motives and rebellion to black writers and people all over the Terra in order to sensitise them about their cultures (Ogundipe 2011).

Ogundipe (2011) explained that Ome sees negritude as an ideological reaction against French colonisation, which aided the potency of African culture and traditions. Campbell defines negritude as "an art of being black (p.6)". Negritude was an attempt by its pioneers to restore their culture and re-establish their identity as black Africans, and being proud of this culture and identity. The writers then, turned this to a movement to bring African traditions into any literary work written by African or black man (Ogundipe, 2011).

3. Contextual or Theoretical Framework

The exploration of the nature of a phenomenon in a research work is usually done, using a specific perspective. Perspective denotes the certain choice of a single angle or point of view from which we sense, categorise, measure or codify experience (Dictionary of English Grammar, Android App.). The perspective through which the analysis of the selected poem was done, which was stylistics- 'Literary Stylistic Analysis' to be precise, is then likened to a theory because it served as a guiding principle in the analysis. Therefore, this study was carried out within the theoretical or contextual framework of stylistics, which involves bringing out, and interpreting the literary devices used by the poet in order to apparently depict the African traditions.

Etymologically, stylistics was initially developed in two directions- the 'Linguistic Stylistics' propounded by a Swiss Linguist, Charles Bally, mainly concerned with the analysis of oral language, and 'Literary Stylistics', devised and championed by a German Linguist, Karl Vossler. The second, being Literary Stylistics, is the investigation and analysis of literary devices used in a literary text -be it drama, prose or poetry (cited in Sarab, 2013). But for the purpose of this study, Literary Stylistics was used.

Literary Stylistics, a branch of stylistics was pioneered by a German linguist, Karl Vossler in the 20th century, to complement Charles Bally's 'Linguistic Stylistics' meant for the analysis of the oral discourses (Sarab, 2013). This aspect of stylistics is used for the analysis of literary works. It is a tool, used to identify how linguistic variables used in a text, constitute meanings or an understanding of the contents of such text. To buttress this view, Katie Wales's 'A Dictionary of Stylistics' cited in Richard (2019) which says that "the goal of most stylistics is not simply to describe the formal features of a text for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text, in order to relate literary effect to linguistic causes..." (par.2). Therefore, Karl Vossler's, Literary Stylistic Analysis' was preferably used to bring out the literary devices and styles which exemplify the African ways of life.

4. Research Methodology

The selected poem was intensively read by the researcher; thereafter, the poetic analysis and interpretation was done, using Literary Stylistic Analysis (LSA) as a guide.

5. Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of Birago Diop's, "Viaticum"

5.1 Presentation of the Poem "Viaticum"

In one of the three jugs
 The three jugs where on certain evenings return
 the tranquil souls,
 the breaths of the ancestors,
 the ancestors who were men,
 the ancestors who were sages,
 Mother has dipped three fingers
 three fingers of her left hand:
 thumb, forefinger and middle finger
 I have dipped three fingers
 three fingers of right hand:
 thumb, forefinger and middle finger.
 With her three fingers red with blood,
 with dog's blood,
 with bull's blood,
 with goat's blood,
 Mother has touched me three times.
 She touch my forehead with her thumb,
 with her forefinger my left breast

and my navel with her middle finger.
 I have held out my fingers red with blood,
 with dog's blood,
 with bull's blood,
 with goat's blood,
 I have held my three fingers to the winds
 the north wind, the east wind,
 the south wind, the west wind:
 and I have raised my three fingers towards the moon
 towards the full moon, the full naked moon
 when she was at the bottom of the biggest jug.
 I have thrust my three fingers into the sand,
 into the sand which had grown cool.
 Mother said: "Go through the world,
 Go in life. They will follow thy traces."
 Since then I go,
 I go by the tracks and on the roads,
 beyond the seas and further still
 beyond the sea and further, further still,
 beyond the sea and beyond the place beyond.
 And when I come to the wicked men,
 the black- hearted men,
 when I come to the envious,
 the black-hearted men,
 before me advance the breaths of the forefathers.

Extracted from (Senanu and Vicent, 2003 p.69-70)

5.2 Plot Synopsis of the Poem

Birago Diop's, "Viaticum" accounts for a mother's preparation of sacrifice to her ancestors (forefathers) for the purpose of an assured protection on her son who wants to embark on a journey. The title of the poem has suggested the contents of it, "Viaticum" is a term used in religion to refer to monetary gift or other valuable things given to a religious officer or priest in the ancient period who wants to embark on a journey for a religious purpose. It is this idea that Diop brought into his artistic or literary writing to portray the cultures of Africa.

At the opening of the poem, the ingredients of the sacrifice have been provided by the mother to invoke the spirits of the ancestors for a guaranteed safety of her son on his journey. "... on certain evenings return the tranquil souls, the breaths of the ancestors (lines 2 & 3)". The above lines express the beginning of the invocations. The thematic preoccupation of this poem is centred on three prominent themes- 'sacrifice making, belief in one's god and ancestral protection'.

The making of sacrifice to the ancestors features, virtually, from the beginning to the end of the poem. "With her fingers red with bloods, with dog's blood; with bull's blood; with goat's blood (lines 13-16) affirm the theme of offering sacrifice to the ancestors. The belief in the ancestors is also evident in the poem. The mother has strong conviction of the existence of the ancestors, who have died for a long time, and their influence on the livings. "Go through the world, go in life. They will follow thy traces (lines 33 & 34)", portray this theme. Finally, the theme of ancestral protection comes out in the poem, "and when I come to the wicked men... before me advance the breaths of the forefathers (lines 40 & 44), are instances of the theme of ancestral protection.

5.3 Literary Devices Used in the Poem

The prominent devices used to unveil the literary significance in exhibiting the vitality of African traditions in the poem, are images and symbolism which are both appeal to the senses of sight and touch.

i. Images:

Local images are used in the poem to show the theme of sacrifice and ritual making, the images are:

- ✓ Image of slaughtered animals e.g. dog, bull & goat
- ✓ Image of ancestors who were men
- ✓ Image of wicked men
- ✓ Image of mother and sea

All these images show the African ways of life

ii. Symbolism:

The use of symbol in the poem, where certain thing represents another is:

- Dog symbolises speed
- Bull symbolises strength
- Goat symbolises demystification
- Moon symbolises fertility
- The west, north, south and east symbolise the four corners of the universe.

5.4 Style

The poet uses a style to show the African cultural heritage in his poem. The use of **number three** has a sacrificial importance within the African society. It is commonly used in rituals, invocations and incantatory presentations. The jug, animals whose blood is spilt, and fingers, are all three in number each.

6. Conclusion

Every community has its specific ways of life. African people admire their culture; they see their culture and traditions as means of survival in life. Africans whole-heartedly believe in their ancestors (forefathers), and cherish everything bequeathed by their forefathers. This is seen in David Diop's; "*Africa*" where he says, "I have never known you, but your beautiful black blood flows in my vein" (lines 5 & 6).

All the pioneers of negritude such as Leopold Senghor, Aime Cessaire, Leon Dames, David Diop and others, had their education abroad. They spent most of their life in Paris, United State in New York, but this did not take away the love they have towards the culture and traditions of Africa, particularly their services to their ancestors, whom they see as their shield in life. Sacrifice making and rituals are major channels they use to communicate with their gods (ancestors); as it is seen in the poem discussed. The mother of the child slaughters animals- dog, bull, goat; makes sacrifice to her ancestors. She uses the blood of the animals to anoint the child so that his journey would be free of dangers.

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